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ABSTRACT

English teachers have given some attention to aesthetic reading, usually terming it the development of literary appreciation, but many of the classroom practices used to foster that appreciation have been counterproductive. One consideration in developing aesthetic reading has to do with the means for promoting reflection in readers. That is, their willingness to contemplate what they are about to read or what they have read and its effect on them. Another consideration in helping students with their aesthetic reading of literature is developing their ability to engage in questioning and problem solving. Good readers distinguish themselves from weaker readers through the ability to ask questions and search for answers that promote greater comprehension of the text and of the reading experience that accompanied it. Therefore, teachers need to create situations that provoke students into asking questions of their own in order to arrive at solutions that satisfy them. Reflection and problem solving promote the reading of literature based on an inquiry mode, in which shared discussion plays a major role. To introduce this approach into the classroom, teachers need to focus the attention of students on actual inquiry and response and to provide opportunities for frequent practice in the process. (The paper concludes with a sequence of activities connected with the reading of Robert Frost's "Storm Fear" that shows how such an approach might be introduced.) (HOD)

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The Role of Reflection, Problem-Solving and Discussion in the Teaching of Literature

The need for reader involvement, of becoming engaged with a text to the point that the reader feels as if the text had been written expressly for him or her, has been well documented. But the moments when this engagement has occurred in the classroom, even for excellent readers, seem not to have happened with any regularity.[1]

For years we have taught students ABOUT literature because that was what we knew and were trained to do. We believed that knowing about literature would lead to proficiency in reading it and in understanding its many viewpoints. We were, of course, repeatedly dismayed by the results, but we attributed the failures either to our own poor planning and lecturing or to students' decreasing abilities to read and comprehend. Seldom did we stop to consider how we ourselves read nor did we analyze with any depth why we responded to some works as we did and why others left us unmoved. On occasion we may have championed literature study as a means for students to examine their own lives, but without a very clear sense of what we wanted to happen as a result. Bryant Fillion, however, has suggested that the "capacity to read and derive benefit from literature involves an interaction of at least three related abilities: aesthetic reading, reflecting, and problem-finding."[2]

Aesthetic reading, or what commonly has been called "literary reading," is not new, but students' ability to experience literature aesthetically has not been explored very closely by classroom teachers even though such scholars as Louise Rosenblatt have been calling for its exploration in classrooms since 1938. More recently Rosenblatt has distinguished between two types of reading: Efferent (non-literary) and Aesthetic (literary). She says:

> In nonaesthetic reading, the reader's attention is focused primarily

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> on what will remain as residue after the reading--the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out....In aesthetic reading, in contrast, the reader's primary concern is with what happens during the actual reading event.... In aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text.[3]

Most students possess the ability to engage in a story, poem or play as an experience by itself. As a matter of fact, the experiences which students have with written language, reading, ideas, and the world in which they live are what provide them with this ability to read aesthetically. English teachers, of course, have given some attention to aesthetic reading, usually terming it the development of literary appreciation, but many of the classroom practices used to foster that appreciation have been counterproductive. Selections are often beyond students' experience, presenting unusual reading difficulty, and class "discussions" seem to focus more on recall of content than exploration of students' experience with the texts. Although recall of text information is an important skill that needs development, if we do not also provide equal time for students to enjoy, contemplate and relive the experience of reading a text, we may be sending a contradictory message about what the purpose of literature study is. In fact, the outcome of aesthetic reading ought not to be a question and answer period with one reader--the teacher--quizzing another reader--the student. Instead, we need a shared exploration and discussion during which all readers' aesthetic responses are considered as part of the search for meaning.

One consideration in developing aesthetic reading has to do with the means for promoting reflection in readers. We could define such reflectiveness as the willingness of readers to contemplate what they are about to read or what they have read and its effect on them. As Fillion points out, "the reflective ability....

necessary for the consideration of literature is also necessary for the contemplation of life---the adoption....of a 'poetic stance' toward life, reflecting on the human meaning of experience, to balance the 'scientific stance,' which closely analyzes the experience in objective terms."[4] Eric Lunzer and Keith Gardner call for a similar approach:

> Reading to answer questions can result in a passive absorption of facts rather than reflection or evaluation. It seems, therefore, that in organizing the purposes of reading across the curriculum, teachers need to balance 'getting information' with genuine inquiry.[5]

With time and practice, students can approach their reading as a process of inquiry. Learning then becomes a conversation between reader and text. However, the ability that students have developed to reflect on their reading seems to vary greatly and may depend largely upon the students' usual approach to experience and, at least to some degree, on what experiences they have had with reading in school. Part of the problem here may be that as teachers we often do too much of the reflecting for students. If this is the case, then we need to begin considering ways to place more responsibility for reflecting with students and then provide opportunities for them to express and share their reflections.

Another consideration in helping students with their aesthetic reading of literature is developing their ability to engage in questioning and problem-solving. Good readers distinguish themselves from weaker readers through the ability to ask questions and search for answers which promote greater comprehension of the text and of the reading experience that accompanied it. Although it might seem to be a simple matter of producing a list of questions that all readers could memorize and then apply to any text, the result of such an approach is already too well measured in students' apathy to "questions for discussion" and other such apparatus that appear in today's literature anthologies. No--the questions to be at all useful ultimately must be generated by students. Yet we face a difficult task

here because although students may be master questioners in certain areas where they have strong interests, in literature classes where the teacher is the master "answer key," they typically feel at a disadvantage. To wean students gradually from such dependence, teachers need to create situations that provoke students into asking questions of their own in order to arrive at solutions which satisfy them. Problem-solving, though, is related to maturity and to familiarity with the subject. The more experience we have with something, the more likely we are to identify the questions that need to be asked. Therefore, we need to keep this principle in mind as we select literature that will provide problems for students to solve.

We could term this reading of literature as the inquiry mode, a mode based on the assumption that reflection and problem-solving are primary objectives in the teaching of literature and that these, in turn, will foster greater aesthetic and non-aesthetic reading skills on the part of students. To introduce this approach into the classroom, we need to focus the attention of students on actual inquiry and response and to provide opportunities for frequent practice in the process. Such an approach does not mean, however, that we must invent new strategies--after all, few methods exist which literature teachers have not tried at one time or another--but the emphasis upon inquiry and student activity becomes as important as the literature itself.

The following sequence of activities connected with the reading of Robert Frost's "Storm Fear" shows how such an approach might be introduced. The lesson moves through two stages--Reflection and Problem-solving--in which shared discussion plays a major role.

REFLECTION

Begin by asking students to think of the worst storm they have ever experienced. Then for five minutes they are to write down everything they can recall about that particular storm--sounds, sights, time, smells, location--without strict regard for order. Basically, they are to free write their memories of the sensory

experience. After the five minutes of free writing, ask students to share a bit of their information. Suggest, for example, that each student supply one or two details from the free writing that stimulate strong memories. Engage in brief discussion, encouraging students to ask each other questions about the information they volunteer.

With the sharing of the students' initial responses completed, ask them to return to their papers and this time free write for four or five minutes about their feelings as a person in the storm. Suggest that they try to recall how they felt, what thoughts went through their minds. At this stage, students may begin to write more freely; if so, let them continue beyond the time limit, but watch for signs that the writing is gradually slowing down and when the majority of students seem to be withdrawing from the free writing, suggest that they stop. Then ask for the sharing again and encourage the same kind of questioning as before among the students as they listen to the different responses.

At this point, suggest that students take a few minutes to look over what they have written and then ask them to do the following:

A. Using the material from the first free writing, write one sentence which describes as graphically as possible the action of the storm; select words and details that will capture for us how you perceived the action at that time.

B. Using material from the second free writing, write a sentence which permits us to understand a key feeling you had or a key thought you associated with the storm.

PROBLEM-SOLVING

Once students have written their two sentences, you may want to have some of them read aloud or you may choose to move on to the following step and leave the reading for later. Indicate to students that they are about to see two sentences written by someone quite familiar with severe storms. In the first sentence, the

writer lets us know about how he sees the storm. In the second sentence, the writer indicates the effect the storm had on him. Students should be asked to study the two sentences carefully. Once they are familiar with the writer's thoughts, they are to re-examine their own two sentences. Then they should begin to note the similarities and/or differences between the first sentence of the writer and theirs, jotting down some of the observations that occur to them as they study the two pieces of writing. When they have finished examining the two first sentences, they are to write a paragraph in which they explain what they have discovered. Then the process is repeated with the second sentence of the writer and that of the student, resulting in another paragraph of discovery.

Here are the two sentences with which students are to work:

1. "When the wind works against us in the dark and pelts with snow the lower-chamber-window on the east and whispers with a sort of stifled bark, the beast, 'Come out!'--it costs no inward struggle not to go, Ah, no!"

2. "I count our strength, two and a child, those of us not asleep subdued to mark how the cold creeps as the fire dies at length--how drifts are piled, dooryard and road ungraded, till even the comforting barn grows far away and my heart owns a doubt whether 'tis in us to arise with day and save ourselves unaided."

This latter stage the teacher may wish to assign as homework, providing ample opportunity for students to study the two sentences carefully and to engage in considerable analysis, moving back and forth between their own accounts and that of Frost. Once the paragraphs have been written, ample time needs to be spent on discussion, letting students talk about their discoveries, comparing their experiences and how they expressed them, how they do or do not match with that of Frost, who, of course, remains unidentified at this point.

Depending upon the results of this sharing time where each students' discovery is as legitimate as another's, the teacher may follow one of two routes.

The poem--and Frost--can be introduced if students seem quite comfortable with what he has expressed; or, if students seem still to be puzzled by his description of the storm, invite them to offer questions about his statements, perhaps listing the various queries on the chalkboard. Then the poem can be presented, preferably with each student having a copy and the teacher or a selected student providing an oral reading of the work. In either route outlined above, the emphasis should continue to be on students' questioning and on their discovering possible solutions by discussion among themselves as to the problems addressed by the questions. These questions should quite easily lead to discussion about such things as the difference in effect that Frost's poem might have in sentence form as contrasted with poetic form; the relationship between snow storms and other kinds of storms which students might have identified in their early reflection. Questions related to form, to wording, to voice, style and other literary matters also will surface during this discussion and can be handled within the context of the students' own language and discovery.

As a final activity, following the completion of the discussion, students might write a poem of their own related to their storm experience, develop a narrative of their experience, develop a more extended comparison/contrast between their responses and those of Frost, look for other poems related to the theme and respond, or take their initial questions and use them as a basis for an essay in which they introduce other readers to Frost's poem. These final activities serve a two-fold purpose. On the one hand, they permit students to reflect once again on the experience of reading and discussing the poem, while on the other, students have experienced a pre-reading, pre-writing experience that can now lead to a fully developed piece of writing, thus showing clearly to students how writing and reading lead to the discovery of meaning.

No one approach to literature, of course, will insure that all students become avid readers or that they will seek increasingly complex pieces of literature to read. However, if we as teachers provide more time in the classroom study of

literature for acknowledging the role of the reader's response and experience in the reading process, then we might well expect a corresponding increase in students' facility with language, since it is language which will serve them as the principal vehicle for literary inquiry

Storm Fear
---Robert Frost

When the wind works against us in the dark,
And pelts with snow
The lower-chamber-window on the east,
And whispers with a sort of stifled bark,
The beast,
"Come out! Come out!"--
It costs no inward struggle not to go,
Ah, no!
I count our strength,
Two and a child,
Those of us not asleep subdued to mark
How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length,--
How drifts are piled,
Dooryard and road ungraded,
Till even the comforting barn grows far away
And my heart owns a doubt
Whether 'tis in us to arise with day
And save ourselves unaided.

NOTES

[1]See Alan C. Purves. Reading and Literature, American Achievement in International Perspective. NCTE Research Report No. 20. Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1981.

[2]Bryant Fillion, "Reading as Inquiry: An Approach to Literature Learning," English Journal 70 (January 1981): 40.

[3]The Reader, the Text, The Poem (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), pp. 23 and 24-25.

[4]Fillion, p. 41.

[5]The Effective Use of Reading (London: Heinemann, 1979), pp. 300-301.

[6]Complete Poems of Robert Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 13.